

# *A River Through The Desert*

## *Week 6: The Garden*

### **1 Reflection**

It has often been noted that the Bible begins in a garden with a tree whose fruit leads to the first sin (Genesis 2 and 3) and ends with the New Jerusalem in which there is a tree whose 'leaves are for the healing of the nations' (Revelation 22:1-5). John Milton described this powerfully in the 17th century in his epic poems *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. It might not be entirely incidental that Jesus sought his Father's will also in a garden (Gethsemane) and sought the strength to fulfil his divine calling, which of course he did (Matthew 26: 36-56).



*Natural beauty near the source of the River Jordan*

Adam and Eve's failure to obey God's will in the Garden of Eden is mirrored in opposite by Jesus's faithful following of God's will in Gethsemane.

One who has not visited the Holy Land might suffer the misapprehension that gardens and green landscapes do not feature significantly there. But the region between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan has a surprising variety of vegetation and flora. In the north, around the Galilee region, plentiful rainfall and a tropical climate create conditions for lush countryside especially in winter and spring (see picture above). In the south of country, from Jerusalem westwards towards the Mediterranean, there are excellent conditions for growth of fruit trees and good arable land. It is not for nothing that the Promised Land is described as a 'land flowing with milk and honey' (Exodus 3:8). In other words, it is rich and fertile. Even in the desert there are beautiful oases and especially noteworthy is Jericho which even today is a source of the most wonderful fruit – dates, bananas, oranges and much more.



*The gardens of the Scots Hotel, Tiberias*

For so many people living in urbanized centres, a garden is a little piece of personal paradise. Especially in a time of pandemic-induced lockdown, our gardens became a refuge for sanity and wellbeing. Time spent planting and nurturing, pruning and clearing can be so helpful for our mental and spiritual health. Or perhaps, without a garden, many have found that a walk in the woods or in a local park has become vital, whilst aspects of normal life to which we were accustomed have been missing. We are also aware that the entire planet we

inhabit is akin to a garden which when its delicate balance is damaged, threatens the entire existence of that garden of creation.

So, whilst the mythical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden does not give us an historical account of the beginnings of human life on earth, it does convey deep and significant truths about the human condition and our need for healing and salvation. It's a description of human nature and our relationship with the rest of creation which resonates throughout the biblical narrative in Old and New Testaments. For instance, St Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: 'For since death came through a human being, the resurrection has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.' (1 Cor 15: 21-22).

After Jesus has his Last Supper with his disciples in an 'Upper Room' in Jerusalem, he then takes his friends out of the city to the garden of Gethsemane. Perhaps it was a convenient place away from crowds and a good place to pray under the stars. It may not have been accidental that an act of betrayal was fixed to take place in a garden amongst the olive trees – a betrayal that would lead to reconciliation of God to humanity, for it was the rebellion of Adam and Eve which (at least mythically speaking) accounts for the breach between God and humanity.



*The garden of Gethsemane under a full moon*

It is a great blessing that the garden of Gethsemane still exists in Jerusalem and is a major focus of Christian devotion for all those who make their Holy Land pilgrimage. It is a place Christians can come to contemplate the courage and sacrifice of Christ as he pleaded that the 'cup of suffering might pass from me'. Everyone who stops here can consider the conflicts and weighty decisions which trouble them, even if these cannot compare to the significance of the moment when Jesus prayed there and sweated droplets of blood.

When I have had big decisions to make, I have often taken myself to the sacred space of a church, but I am also often drawn to a place in nature, perhaps a secluded garden, from where I can gain a sense of perspective away from the noise of contemporary life and its multiple device distractions. Personally, I am not given to expect direct divine guidance but time for the calming of the inner chatter in a pastoral-type context, often seems to bring more clarity.

The Church of All Nations set in Gethsemane, designed and built by the brilliant architect Antonio Barluzzi, manages to combine both church and garden in his design; it is also called the Church of the Agony. The doors into the church are made of wrought iron. The ancient, twisted tree design gives the effect of walking into an olive grove.



*Wrought iron door of olive trees*

The interior of the church is stubbornly dark, evoking nighttime as if every time one walks into this church, one is transported to that first, fateful Maundy Thursday evening. Christians take great comfort from the account of Jesus's agonized prayers and ultimate submission to the



*The Church of All Nations on the Mt of Olives*

the will of God. The unfolding of events is instructive for us: as with Jesus, our prayers should avoid trying (as if we could) to change God's mind or telling God what to do. It is more appropriate that we should seek to have our minds and ways changed by the will of God. To discern God's will for is one of the great challenges of faith.

As Lent comes to the climax of Holy Week, we are drawn deeper into that drama of Jesus's willing but costly sacrifice. Stopping for a moment in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray as if we were with Jesus in his hour of testing can help us to contemplate for a moment, our own lives and the needs of the world. We are indeed a long way from the garden of Eden and its imagery of harmonious co-existence within the created order. In one post resurrection encounter, Jesus is mistaken for a gardener which might suggest to us, as we contemplate the current state of the world, that our faith might enable us to recover something of that harmony. But the climate crisis tells us that we have an urgent and challenging task to address because we have exploited the garden which God has created, rather than stewarding it.

Our Lent journey comes to a conclusion here in this moment of challenge as Jesus's journey reached its decisive moment with a betrayal in the garden. But we know that the journey does not end there. In Jerusalem, spiritually, all roads lead to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, that shrine which for nearly two thousand years has been venerated as the place of crucifixion and the place of resurrection. Whatever the challenges or difficulties of Lent, or of our lives in general, as Christians we know that the decisive reality above everything else is the resurrection. It is that event and its message of victory of light over dark and life over death which can sustain us in our continuing Christian pilgrimage.



We hope that this virtual journey through the Holy Land, noticing the features of the Land and their essential part in the unfolding events of salvation, may encourage and strengthen you in daily life. We hope that this course might encourage you to undertake a pilgrimage to see these places for yourself if you have never been before. If you have already made a Holy

Land pilgrimage, there is almost certainly more still to discover. Once the College re-opens at some point in 2021, we are here to welcome you on one of our study pilgrimages.

**2 Watch the film:** The Garden at <https://youtu.be/459aM2ApC8E> on YouTube

**3 Bible reading:** Matthew 26: 36-56

Read the passage once or twice

#### 4 Questions

- 1 Imagine yourself in that garden with the other disciples accompanying Jesus as he prays. What does that moment in time feel like? Why is it hard to stay focused in prayer? What helps you to use your times of prayer usefully?
- 2 In the introduction to Paradise Lost, Milton prays for assistance in his creative task asking God: 'What is dark within me, illumine'. In what ways and to what effect can God illumine the dark places in you and in the world?
- 3 In the 1970s, in the song *Woodstock*, Crosby, Stills and Nash sang: 'We are stardust, we are golden, we are billion year old carbon, And we've got to get back to the garden'.  
For you, what could it mean to 'get back to the garden'?
- 4 As Lent draws to a close, what are the parts of this Lent course that you want to take with you into Holy Week and beyond?

You might like to spend some time in prayer.

You might like to reflect further on this session and write down anything you want to hold on to.

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